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Former Diplomats: How Much Should They Tell?

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 25 — As William H. Sullivan recounts the tale, it was "a complete surprise" when he was asked in 1977 to become the American Ambassador to Iran. Mr. Sullivan, perhaps the leading Southeast Asian specialist in the Foreign Service, had never served in the Middle East and "knew little about its culture or its ethos."

"While I recognized the importance of Iran, the proposal did not make me jump for joy," the retired diplomat says in a 296-page book, "Mission to Iran," which has just been published. Mr. Sullivan, it turned out, was to be the last United States envoy to Iran. He was there when the Shah left the country and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from exile. He departed seven months before the takeover of the American Embassy.

Now, just two years later, he has written a highly readable, controversial memoir that is, in effect, a cri de coeur by a proud diplomat who makes it clear that he thinks Jimmy Carter's White House, and in particular Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser, did as much as anyone to "lose" Iran.

Mr. Carter and Mr. Brzezinski are working on their own memoirs and undoubtedly will have something different to say about Mr. Sullivan's sweeping conclusion that after he departed Iran in April 1979, "the feckless manner in which the Carter Administration conducted its affairs continued, the erratic ambitions of Brzezinski were unabated, and the failure to understand events in Iran was compounded."

'It Was Not Our Finest Hour'

"All of this led, in November of 1979, to the taking of the hostages in the American Embassy and to a period of national humiliation unmatched in our history," he writes. "It was not our finest hour."

Mr. Sullivan's memoir is the latest example of a rapidly growing cottage industry in Washington in which former diplomats take to the typewriter to write about their experiences and publicize their views of policy and events. David Newsom, who retired in January as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, has written an ar-

ticle criticizing the Persian Gulf policies of the Carter and Reagan Administrations; Herman Eilts, former Ambassador to Egypt, has publicized his view that the Camp David process has run out of steam and that a different Middle East policy should be found.

The proliferation of memoirs and articles by such well-known and respected career diplomats as Mr. Sullivan, Mr. Eilts and Mr. Newsom have alarmed some past and present members of the Foreign Service who believe that retired officers should keep their thoughts to themselves. If they feel compelled to write, this school of thought holds, they should put considerable distance between the event and the writing of it.

"I think it is outrageous for career Foreign Service officers to write memoirs about what they have just done," a veteran diplomat still on active duty said the other day. "Every President comes into office questioning the loyalty of the Foreign Service. When critical memoirs start appearing, it only makes it harder to convince Presidents in the future that we can be trusted."

The debate is, of course, not new. When Dean Rusk was Secretary of State in the 1960's, he was highly incensed by the articles and books written by former aides to John F. Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Theodore Sorensen, and a book about the State Department by Roger Hillsman.

All three disclosed "classified" information relating to relatively recent events. Mr. Rusk shares the view of such other retired officers as Philip Habib that Foreign Service officers should not write about contemporary events. He has never published a memoir. But Mr. Rusk did record his experiences for Columbia University's oral history project so that they would be available to scholars in the future.

On the other side, the literature of

diplomatic history would certainly be much poorer if such former ambassadors to Moscow as George F. Kennan and Charles Bohlen had not written about their careers. And Henry A. Kissinger, completing the second of three volumes on his experiences, differs sharply with Mr. Rusk on the propriety of former Secretaries of State telling all.

Mr. Sullivan's book is limited to Iran and is not an attempt even to tell the detailed story of the two years when he was Ambassador. Rather, it is an episodic and pointed account in which he reveals how he and the Carter Administration — principally Mr. Brzezinski — came to a parting of the ways over framing policy even though Mr. Sullivan was still the Ambassador in Teheran.

At one point, he says, "I received a most unpleasant and abrasive cable from Washington, which, in my judgment, contained an unacceptable aspersion upon my loyalty."

'Too Much for My Tolerance'

"In the whole cascade of frustration that had swept over me during the past few months, this proved to be too much for my tolerance," he wrote.

"When I was told by telephone from the State Department that the insulting message had originated at the White House, I thought that I no longer had a useful function to perform on behalf of the President in Teheran."

Mr. Sullivan says that he remained on post to help in the evacuation of Americans but that, since he no longer had the confidence of the White House, "and since I no longer held them in appropriate respect, there was no need for me to disguise my attitudes through the use of tactful language."

"My communications became not only abrupt but occasionally acerbic," he said.